
TOWARD INDEPENDENT LABOR POLITICS IN BRITAIN

*The Eighties and Nineties
In the Trades Union Congress*

by
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FOREWORD

THIS pamphlet constitutes a valuable chapter from an unpublished study on the British labor movement by the late Edward M. Cohen, teacher, economist, for years a devoted member of the L.I.D.

The publication of the pamphlet is sponsored by the Edward M. Cohen Memorial Committee, a committee of his associates of many years standing in the New York Teachers' Guild and other organizations.

Today the British Labor party is constituting "His Majesty's Government", and is playing a role of tremendous importance in the life of Great Britain and the life of the world.

Few realize the years of struggle on the part of the members of the party to make it a factor in the British political scene. An even smaller number have the slightest conception of the period prior to the party's formation when minority groups within the British Trades Union Congress struggled in vain to have organized labor sever its connections with the Liberal and Tory parties, and stand politically on its own feet.

This latter story was told with clarity and scholarship by Mr. Cohen prior to his untimely death. It is not only of much historical interest, but has its special significance in a country such as the United States, where organized labor on the whole is still supporting the older political parties.

The L.I.D. is happy to publish this sponsored pamphlet not only because of the League's long friendship with Mr. Cohen, but because of the inherent value of this study.

The monograph is a part of Mr. Cohen's dissertation which he was preparing for his Doctorate at Columbia University, from which institution he had already received his degree of Master of Arts. To gain first hand information on his study, Mr. Cohen visited England in 1923 and in 1925. Here he met many leaders of the labor and socialist movement.

Born in Brooklyn, the author was successively a student of C.C.N.Y., a veteran of World War I, and an instructor in history at the Thomas Jefferson and Samuel J. Tilden High Schools. At these schools he was active in stimulating student interest in public affairs and served as chairman of the Teachers Welfare Committee. He was a charter member of the New York Teachers Guild, and chairman of its Academic Freedom Committee. He was likewise an active spirit in independent political movements.

Harry W. Laidler

TOWARD INDEPENDENT LABOR POLITICS IN BRITAIN

Introduction

SINCE the beginning of the century, the British labor movement has been wedded to the idea of independent political action. When, in the 1899 convention of the British Trades Union Congress, a resolution was passed giving birth to the Labor Representation Committee, later the British Labor party, the workers of Great Britain cast their die against allying themselves with the Liberal or the Tory party and in favor of building a party of their own.

To many today, who realize how deeply embedded is the tradition of political independence on the part of the workers of Britain, there is little realization of the years of education and agitation within the trade union movement before organized labor broke their ties with the two old parties and particularly with the Liberal party, and began to put their faith in a party of their own.

That agitation, while having its origin in the early Chartist movement, was carried on within the Trades Union Congress from the early eighties to the historic convention of 1899.

This movement within the Trades Union Congress to sever labor's ties with both Liberals and Tories reflected, more than any other phase of labor representation, the contemporary social philosophy of organized labor's directorate. Faith in a political set up which was distinct from, and opposed to, existing party organizations had to be based on the concept, no matter how vague, of the class struggle. To embark on a venture of electing and supporting working men candidates required a great expenditure not only of energy but also of money — an unusually bold enterprise for a rising labor movement. The responsibility of leadership dictated that such a project should not be undertaken except as a last resort. The exclusion of other alternatives presupposed, therefore, that the differences between labor, on the one hand, and the manufacturing and landed interests on the other, were basically irreconcilable. Since the Liberals and the Tories were generally recognized as the parliamentary spokesmen in the main of these propertied interests, the belief that labor must provide a group of its own to look after the workers' welfare in Westminster implied, despite verbal denials, the existence of class conflict.

Labor and the Class Conflict

The idea of basically divergent interests between the upper and lower strata of society was not new to the British workers of the eighties. Together with other radical theories, generally associated with socialist maxims, it was expounded by intellectuals of the Chartist period. Publications like the *Poor Man's Guardian* and later on *The Northern Star* excoriated with equal vehemence both Whigs and Tories. Economic and social salvation could be achieved by independent working class action only. The collapse of Chartism inevitably discredited, for the time being at least, the doctrines of that historic movement. Of all these the theory of the class struggle was most slow in regaining credence among the artisan classes.

The reasons for this were quite obvious. Superficially the Chartist movement appeared essentially political in nature. But such was not the case. The periodical literature of Chartism repeatedly stressed the fact that its program for government reform was only the means to an end and not the end itself. The goal was social and economic betterment

for the underprivileged. Universal suffrage would bring it about. The extension of the franchise in 1867, especially since it was consummated with the substantial aid of middle class elements, removed, temporarily at any rate, the props from the philosophy of the class war. Persons of influence within labor circles could and did point to evidence to show that, by cooperating with people outside their ranks, the workers would be able to slough off patent abuses and whittle away some of the injustices from the social and economic structure.

The End of Liberal-Laborism

This was precisely the policy pursued for almost a generation and constituted the core of Liberal-Laborism. The experience with Liberals both inside and outside of Parliament and the socialist agitation in the eighties pointed to the flaws in the specious reasoning of the "Lib-Labs." It was a foregone conclusion that the Trades Union Congress debates on the subject of political independence would both reveal a recognition of the past history and mirror the conflicting views of the contemporary labor leaders.

While the issue did not assume importance before the middle eighties, utterances at previous Congresses might be construed as hints at independent political action. For example, at the second congress held in 1869, Alfred A. Walton declared that, while there were a few friends of labor in the House, the influence of these in the midst of "a Parliament of Capitalists" was practically negligible. Furthermore, he maintained, the capitalists, even with the best of intentions, could not be expected either to understand or to champion the interests of the workers. He also warned his listeners not to yield to the pressure of the slogan, "Don't divide the Liberal interest."

At the same meeting, William Harry went much further by declaring that both parties were equal enemies of the people and even suggested the formation of an industrial party.¹ Twelve years later, in 1881, W. Crawford, chairman of the Parliamentary Committee, cautioned the working classes against being drawn into the squabbles of party politics and called upon them to be "rigidly independent" in their actions. However, he did not deplore the fact that the in-

¹ Report, British Trades Union Congress (T.U.C.) 1869; A. W. Humphrey, *History of Labor Representation*, p. 65.

dustrial population was generally found on the Liberal side.² By no stretch of the imagination could one ascribe to the above remarks a suggestion of independence. Their authors were Liberals, and, at best, hoped for more concessions by the Liberal party in running bona fide working men for elective offices.

Miners' Leader Urges Independent Action (1884)

The debates at the 1884 Trades Union Congress produced more definite pronouncements on the question. John Wilson, representing the Durham miners, boldly came out for an independent labor party. He maintained that inadequate representation in the Commons would continue until the workers took matters into their own hands. If the principles of political independence were sound, the working class ought to take measures to implement them with whatever means, no matter how limited, were at their disposal. He saw no hope of favorable legislation until the laboring classes exercised the power granted them by statute.

Following in the same vein, another delegate declared that, while he did not wish "to depreciate in the slightest degree" any assistance rendered them by bourgeois radicals in the Commons, he was nevertheless convinced that the interests of the workers could best be served by men from their own ranks. He called upon his colleagues to sink their political controversies and unite in a common purpose. "Those little differences were the great cause of the divisions in the ranks of labor."³

These voices, however, were cries in the wilderness. Their number and volume were destined to increase before any appreciable effect could be registered in the Trades Union Congress.

Although the question of labor representation was the subject of the major debate at the 1885 Congress, the problem of political independence received scant attention. One of the delegates asserted that, while both parties had done good work on behalf of labor, he was nevertheless convinced that the formation of a "Radical Labor party" was a necessary prerequisite to the attainment of their aims. But this aspect of the discussion was not publicly discussed at this Congress

² *Labor Standard*. Sept. 17, 1881.

³ Report T.U.C. 1884. p. 31.

by anyone else. It was lost sight of in the midst of the debate on other aspects of the political scene.

Formation of Electoral Labor Committee (1886)

What appeared at the time like a momentous step relating to political independence was taken at the 1886 Trades Union Congress. F. Maddison, in his presidential address, asserted that the Reform Act was not only just and wise but also constituted a clear recognition of the justice of the demand that the people be directly represented by men of their own order. He was angered by allegations that the campaign for political action was the work of agitators. Like his predecessors, he acknowledged the debt and gratitude of labor members to other classes for their activities in Parliament. But, he maintained, this was not sufficient, and if the toiling masses desired their cause to prosper, they must not rest content until their representatives had a place in the seat of Imperial and executive power — the British House of Commons — and occupied posts “within the charmed circle of the cabinet.”

More definite utterances followed. In the debate on Shipton’s resolution for the establishment of district funds, Martin, a delegate from Hartlepool, vigorously asserted that labor candidates should not ally themselves with any party and must function as independent members. Pickard, a Liberal-Labor M.P., declared in unmistakable language that he was a Radical, Liberal or Whig before he thought of becoming a labor representative. He would support the Liberals in general policies that he believed in, and would recognize the right of a Tory-Labor member to follow the dictates of his own conscience.

The most decisive step in the direction of a more independent political position, however, was taken at this Conference by T. R. Threlfall, a delegate from Stockport and the retiring president. Threlfall moved that the Congress viewed “with satisfaction the growing intelligence of the masses to recognize in their political emancipation the power they possess to demand the inalienable right of men in making laws to which they have to subscribe.” To give practical effect to various resolutions of this and former Congresses on the subject of labor representation, it was essential to form an “Electoral Labor Committee which shall act in cooperation with the Parliamentary Committee, the labor representatives

in the House of Commons, and the friends of labor representation throughout the country." The proposed organization was to consist of twenty-four members representing the eight divisions into which the country had been divided.

This step was regarded as an obvious attempt at political independence. The opponents of this move tried to sabotage it by moving an amendment which would place the whole matter in the hands of the trade unions. This subterfuge, however, failed. The amendment was overwhelmingly defeated and the resolution, after a lengthy debate, was adopted by a vote of 59 to 19.⁴

For practical reasons the Electoral Committee was made an offshoot and not a component part of the Congress. The movement of protest and the waves of social unrest were impinging upon the labor federation. Some of the unions viewed this tendency with increasing apprehension. A number of them threatened to secede from the central body; others either withdrew their annual grants or were continuing them by decreasing majorities. To avoid the danger of a serious rift, the Electoral Committee was established as an independent organization. Unions with advanced views on labor representation had thus an opportunity to advance the cause of affiliation. Others were in no way obligated to do so.⁵

Threlfall's Attack on Electoral Committees (1887)

It was, however, in the Swansea Congress held in 1887 that occurred the most dramatic debate on labor representation staged up to that time. This debate was precipitated by mere accident. S. Uttley, of the Sheffield Trades Council, introduced a resolution, innocuous enough in itself, calling upon the workers to form electoral associations with a view of returning to Parliament and local legislative bodies workmen who would be able to speak with authority upon all questions affecting the working classes. He declared that labor's representatives had performed invaluable service to their class and it was therefore imperative that their number be increased. This could be accomplished if the industrial population applied itself to the task, and if the state provided salaries and election expenses.

⁴ Report T.U.C. 1886. pp. 35-7.

⁵ T. R. Threlfall, "New Departures in Trade Unionism", *Nineteenth Century*, Oct., 1890, p. 520.

No hint at criticism of the Congress' political policy or of the conduct of the "labor members" in Parliament could be discovered in either the text of the motion or in the remarks of its sponsor. Some of the speakers followed in a similar vein and pointed to concrete evidence to show how the working men members of Parliament blocked objectionable legislation. Mr. Cameron of London accused the delegates of being partial to the Liberals and charged that many objected to Conservative Candidates "however good they might be."

Mr. Threlfall's vigorous rebuttal led to the climax of the debate. He denied Mr. Cameron's allegations. If a Tory labor candidate could be found who would support the Congress' program on manhood suffrage, payment of members, and land reform, he would deserve the workers' support. Though he was a strong adherent of one political party, Threlfall bluntly declared, his experience during the past twelve months had convinced him that the time was ripe for the formation of a distinct labor party which must cut itself adrift from the great parties of the country. Threlfall asserted that the Electoral Labor Committee had found itself impotent to carry out the ideas suggested because it was impossible to advance the campaign for a national labor party without a settled program. In the past year the Labor Electoral Association had been organized in a dozen industrial centers and he confidently predicted that thirty workers' representatives would attain membership in the House of Commons at the next general election.

By way of refutation of these assertions, W. Pickard, representing the Lancashire Miners, referred to his own experience in the 1874 election when the Liberals declined to endorse him. His backers endeavored to separate their platform from both Liberalism and Conservatism but found to their cost that this was difficult under the circumstances to do. His fingers "had been burnt once," Pickard declared, "and they had not quite recovered since."

Keir Hardie, Crusader for Political Independence

This speech of the Lancashire miners' delegate brought to his feet the subsequently dubbed "black knight" of the Trades Union Congress, James Keir Hardie. This was the first time that Hardie had taken an active part in the

Congress' debate on this subject and his remarks on this occasion brought him into prominence as a coming man in the British and the world labor movement.

Hardie was born amid conditions of drab poverty. He became a worker at 10 years of age. In his teens he suffered frequently from unemployment; was forced to migrate from place to place while the elder Hardie was in search of work and escaped miraculously from a disaster while employed in the mines. By the time he was twenty he had become a full-fledged miner, and, at the instigation of his mother, a worker in the temperance movement.

His experience in the temperance movement gave him a training in public speaking that stood him in good stead as did his training as chairman of his local union and an active member of its grievance committee. His labor activity led to his dismissal from the mine and, at the early age of twenty-three, he began a career of organizing the Scottish miners, earning his livelihood partly by running a small retail shop and, partly, by engaging in journalistic work.⁶

In May, 1887, the Ayrshire Miners' Union, for the most part Hardie's creation, went on record for the formation of a Labor party and agreed "to assist in returning one or more members to represent the miners of Scotland at the first available opportunity."⁷

Thus, when Hardie appeared as the union's delegate at the 1887 Congress, he was morally obligated, if not as yet personally inclined, to work for some form of independent political action.

The Hardie - Broadhurst Debate

Ironically enough, Hardie's maiden speech challenged not only the policies of the labor representatives, but also the political conduct of the Congress' most distinguished member, Henry Broadhurst.

Like his bold censor, Broadhurst lived through a period of harrowing poverty as a young man. But the resemblance between Hardie and Broadhurst ended there. For by 1887 Broadhurst had attained a national reputation in the fields of trade unionism and Liberalism. As a battle-scarred veteran

⁶ Frank Smith, *From Pit to Parliament*; William Stewart, J. Keir Hardie (the standard biography), Chapter 1.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 24.

of many a struggle on behalf of the toiling masses, he was intimately associated for almost two decades with the industrial phases of the labor movement. He was secretary of the Labor Representation League during its heyday and occupied for many years a similar post on the all important Parliamentary Committee. After several unsuccessful attempts, he finally succeeded (1880) in entering Parliament, befriended the workers' political idol, Gladstone, and attained the very pinnacle of political fame for himself and his class when the "Grand Old Man" invited him to join the ministry after the 1886 election. It was at this Goliath of labor at whom the obscure David in the person of Keir Hardie slung his verbal arrows.

Hardie threw consternation into the Congress by declaring that labor representatives were going to constituencies as Liberals but were in reality in direct antagonism to the working classes. The reference was to Broadhurst whom he accused of supporting a member who had been unfriendly to labor, including a Liberal candidate, Mr. Brunner of Norwich, who worked his men unusually long hours and paid, according to Hardie, disgracefully low wages.

As was to be expected, a number of delegates took up the cudgels for Mr. Broadhurst. Mr. Bailey of Nottingham accused Hardie of traducing their respected leader and confidently predicted that the accomplishments of Mr. Hardie would never equal those already attained by Mr. Broadhurst. Another Nottingham delegate, Mr. Cheetham, protested against Hardie's remarks as out of place and declared that it was up to the workers from Nottingham who sent Broadhurst to Westminster "to demand a right to inquire into his actions."

In vindication of his conduct, Broadhurst held up his helpless victim to a good deal of ridicule. He imputed to Mr. Hardie the intention of trying to teach him duties in political and trade union matters. Since when, proclaimed the speaker, had Mr. Hardie or those he represented become such apostles of purity in elections or such devoted leaders of labor as to be qualified to lecture the Congress and especially himself on such matters? He was not aware of any sacrifices on the part of Hardie or any of his supporters that had helped to lift labor from its position of fifty years back, when men like Odger Howell and others bore the brunt of the fight.

At this point Hardie punctured the solemnity of the occasion with his ejaculation, "I was not born".

Broadhurst then proceeded to charge his accuser of being a Tory agent who got his information from the waste-paper baskets of the party's journals. He deplored "these intolerable un-English and lecturing attacks" as a new feature of the Congress and concluded with the remark that before embarking on any political venture he would not go "to the high priest and prophet of Ayrshire (Hardie) and ask his blessing and direction on the enterprise."

The following day the debate was resumed by Mr. Fenwick, one of the Liberal-Labor M.P.'s. Fenwick bemoaned the fact that the influence of labor members was being undermined because they declined "to accept certain revolutionary measures that had been submitted to them." He further declared that there were even then many political parties in the House of Commons, and that unless labor was prepared to ally itself with one of them, they must wait a long time "for the emancipation of the working men of this country."

As if to avoid any misunderstanding as to which party he had in mind as an ally of the workers, he stated that, while the Liberals supported their candidates, the Conservatives helped to defeat them.⁸

Clash of Social Philosophies

The significance of this debate lay in its reflection of conflicting labor philosophies rather than in its practical accomplishments. It represented a struggle between a challenging new leadership clamoring for new policies best adapted to changing conditions, and an experienced old guard determined to justify its position by reminiscences of past achievements.

The new doctrines of protest were finding their mark. Socialism, whether Christian, Fabian, or Marxian, was making headway among the workers. The same held true for land reform. Some of the propagandists of these panaceas were also active workers on behalf of unionism and therefore represented their organization at the Trades Union Congress. The introduction and discussion of such resolu-

⁸ The entire debate is recorded in the Report of the 1887 Congress, pp. 28-32.

tions as the ones demanding land nationalization and socialization of industry showed to what extent dissident social theories were making headway among the laboring masses. While there was unanimity as to the need, there was sharp disagreement as to the method of securing an increased number of workers' representatives in Parliament. The resulting discord afforded an opportunity for denouncing existing policies. Those who opposed the policy of collaboration with the Liberals — a frankly bourgeois party — attacked a point of view adhered to by labor for almost a generation and criticized a leadership which held the reins of control. Broadhurst typified the old; Keir Hardie, though not yet prepared to go to lengths to which he subsequently went, exemplified the new viewpoint emerging in the world of labor. The future was on the side of Keir Hardie.

Save for some strong language in some of the presidential addresses or an occasional flare-up growing out of debates on resolutions, the next decade of Trades Union Congresses produced few definite measures designed to bring about an independent labor party.

Workers' Political Associations Urged (1888)

At the 1888 Congress, Threlfall sponsored a motion urging the workers in industrial centers to form electoral associations with a view of returning workmen to Parliament who were able to speak with authority upon questions affecting the working classes. The debate on the resolution showed up some poignant experiences of labor in politics. W. Matkin (Liverpool) charged that one of the old parties in his city had failed to keep its promise to support workers' candidate for the schoolboard. He ran independently and lost by only 200 votes. Matkin promised that the following year two more candidates would run "independent of party." Despite Threlfall's denial, Charles Fenwick, M.P., accused the Labor Electoral Association of discrediting labor M.P.'s in their constituencies.

Keir Hardie then took the floor and raised a minor tempest by repeating his previous year's attacks on Broadhurst and other "labor" M.P.'s. He upbraided "the old guard" for refusing to raise in Parliament the question of inhuman working conditions in the establishments of Messrs. Brunner and Hill, whose names figured so prominently in the debates

of the Swansea Congress of 1887. Under the circumstances, Hardie maintained, such "labor" M.P.'s were not entitled to the respect of trade unionists. Those accused by Hardie evaded the issue by referring to the proceedings of the preceding Congress. Mr. Threlfall's resolution was then put to a vote and carried with only three dissenting votes.⁹

T.U.C. President's Plea for Independent Action (1890)

The 1890 Congress was the next one which gave some consideration to the issue of political independence. In his presidential address, W. Matkin came out unequivocally for independent political action. Conceding that there were men of wealth and position who sympathized with labor's aspirations, he declared them to be the exceptions that proved the rule. The professions of wire-pulling politicians were only meant to deceive. Had they been sincere, fifty workingmen should have secured seats in the House at Westminister.

As a matter of fact, the safest seats were reserved for wealthy partisans, while constituencies assigned to labor candidates were those where success was hopeless. This state of affairs convinced the speaker that landowners would remain landowners, and capitalists would remain capitalists "irrespective of the political coats they wear or the party songs they sing." He brushed aside the contention that labor's claims were contingent upon the enactment of this or that reform measure by asserting that this excuse had been offered for twenty-five years and would continue to be offered for generations unless labor itself took some definite steps to enforce its claims. He further asserted that since a regenerated society must be preceded by a regenerated House of Commons, it was the workers' obvious duty to increase the labor party in the Commons. The fact that the economic complexion of Parliament was changing from that of a landowners' to that of a lawyers' assemblage did not alter the situation, since the legal profession, like the others, was not likely to neglect the task of looking after its interests at the expense of the public. By way of implementing his remarks, Matkin suggested that local conferences be called at an early date to determine appropriate policies and to run candidates irrespective of party convenience.¹⁰

⁹ Report T.U.C. 1888. pp. 23-6.

¹⁰ Report T.U.C. 1890. p. 27.

MacDonald and Burns on Nationalization

Aside from the presidential address, the debate precipitated by E. Harford's resolution calling upon trade unions to use their utmost efforts to give practical effect to labor representation, revealed the growing sentiment for political independence both within and outside the Trades Union Congress. Threlfall introduced an amendment demanding salaries for M.P.'s, the placing of election expenses on the rates, and the popular election of local government officials. This amendment became part of the original motion.

A different situation, however, arose in the case of the significant amendment proposed by James MacDonald,¹¹ who represented the London tailors. MacDonald created a furor by his proposal that no candidates should receive the support of working men unless such candidates were in favor of the nationalization of land, shipping, railways and all other means of production. Amidst great confusion, he criticized the "labor" M.P.'s for being "hampered by political jugglers and tricksters".

MacDonald was supported by his fellow socialist, John Burns, who called upon the Congress to rid itself of the charge of being an appendage of the Liberal party by going on record in favor of labor candidates, irrespective of party politics, and adopting a working class social democratic program "irrespective of Liberal or Tory politicians." Although the amendment dealing with the attitude of M.P.'s regarding nationalization was defeated by a vote of 196 to 69, the substantial strength mustered in its favor reflected the increasing influence of radical doctrines among the working classes. The resolution urging labor to take vigorous action to increase its representation in Parliament was thereupon adopted without opposition.¹²

The debate on the socialist amendment is germane to the history of independent political action, as political independ-

¹¹ James MacDonald was an outstanding member of the socialist S.D.F.; a very active worker in the interest of socialism and succeeded George Shipton as secretary of the London Trades Council. Will Thorne is authority for the statement that James and not James Ramsay MacDonald was to have been chosen secretary of the Labor Representation Committee in 1900. Many of the delegates at this historic conference which launched the L.R.C. thought they were voting for the London tailor and not for the comparatively unknown intellectual, James Ramsay MacDonald. See H. W. Lee and E. Archibald, *Social Democracy in Britain*, p. 85; Hugh Dalton, *Practical Socialism for Britain*, p. 24.

¹² Report T.U.C. 1890. pp. 35-6.

ence presupposed sharp differences between the artisan groups and the middle classes whose parliamentary spokesmen were the Liberals and to an increasing extent the Tories. In the final analysis acceptance of this amendment implied an acceptance of the class struggle theory and the inevitable approval of a socialist philosophy. A number of years were to elapse before the Trades Union Congress and its offshoot, the Labor party, aligned themselves on the side of socialism.

Comparatively little attention was devoted to the issue of political independence at the 1891 and 1892 Trades Union Congresses. At the latter, a resolution instructing the Parliamentary Committee carefully to consider and prepare a scheme for independent labor representation, especially in its financial aspects, was adopted by a vote of 141 against 140. The indefatigable James MacDonald once again sponsored his socialist amendment. Although it failed of adoption, it nevertheless obtained 128 affirmative votes as against 153 for the opposition.¹³ The increased strength once again revealed the parallelism between political independence and the acceptance of a socialist philosophy.

Passage of Socialist Resolutions (1893)

Events beyond the control of the Trades Union Congress portended a lively debate on the question of independent political action at the 1893 Congress. In January of this year, delegates from about sixty organizations pledged to independent political action met at a conference at Bradford and launched "The Independent Labor party."¹⁴

The chief aim of the I.L.P. was to convert the organized labor movement to the acceptance of a socialist program and to a policy of political independence. As almost all of the moving spirits within the I.L.P. were also active trade unionists, it was a foregone conclusion, therefore, that little effort would be spared to put the Trades Union Congress on record in favor of independent political action.

The socialist delegates took charge of the issue on the floor of the Congress. In moving his resolution dealing with the financial phase of labor representation, Ben Tillett asserted that the preceding three years had witnessed a growing

¹³ Report T.U.C. 1892. pp. 43-5.

¹⁴ M. Beer, *History of British Socialism*, V. II, pp. 302-5; G. D. H. Cole and Raymond Postgate, *The British People*.

desire among the trade unions for parliamentary representation entirely distinct from any political party.

The irrepressible James MacDonald moved as an amendment a modified form of his annual socialist resolution. In support of it he argued that a labor party would have "to begin at the beginning." Although a number of people claimed to represent the interests of labor in Parliament, each one constituted a party unto himself. The chaos, in the opinion of the London tailor, was due to a lack of guiding principle. This his socialist amendment aimed to supply as the "only basis upon which they could build up a thoroughly independent and effectual labor party." He maintained further that the practical application of his amendment would release three-fourths of the British workers from the yoke of wage slavery.

Pete Curran, a founder of the I.L.P. and a member of its first National Administrative Council, took up the cudgels for MacDonald's proposal. Amidst shouts of "no", Curran insisted that he and his fellow socialists would repeatedly bring up the amendment until they carried the Congress with them. Its adoption, even though by the close vote of 137 against 97, reduced the threat to an empty gesture. Its ratification indicated the extent to which radical doctrines were penetrating the ranks of the working classes and the consequent whittling of the influence of the old guard leadership. The final step of independent political action could not be long delayed.

Defeat of Political Action Move

The approval of both a socialist resolution and its inevitable noncomitant, political independence, was expecting too much at one time from a labor movement whose very marrow was penetrated by the tradition of gradualism. Consequently serious opposition greeted Keir Hardie's resolution calling upon the Congress to declare that the cause of labor in Parliament should be asserted "irrespective of the convenience of any political party" and that to secure this it was imperative that the labor members in the House of Commons should be "unconnected with either Liberal or Tory party, and should sit in opposition to any government, until such time as they are strong enough to form a Labor Cabinet."

Readily conceding that, in the past, it was the Liberal party which had brought about most of the reforms for the

advancement of the workers' interests, Hardie nevertheless contended that a group of ten labor members acting as a political unit would be in a position to approach any government and secure concessions not otherwise obtainable. The interests of labor demanded that its parliamentary spokesmen "act independently and not in connection with the advanced or progressive party."¹⁵ Although the resolution was defeated by a vote of 96 against 119, it seemed only a matter of time before the growing minority would become a substantial majority.

In a sense, therefore, the 1893 Congress climaxed the campaign for independent political action. The annual labor parliament offset its failure to adopt a proposal for an outright workers' party by approving the two essential prerequisites for political independence: a scheme for financing labor candidatures and the acceptance, in principle at least, of a socialistic philosophy.

Save for the adoption of a much more strongly worded socialist resolution, the 1894 Congress did not advance the cause of labor representation. As was to be expected, the socialist delegates, including Keir Hardie, Tom Mann, James MacDonald, and John Burns, were the sponsors of the motion which called for the nationalization of "the land, and the whole means of production, distribution and exchange." The Parliamentary Committee was instructed to promote and support legislation with the above object. Significantly enough this measure was adopted by the overwhelming majority of 219 against 61.¹⁶

Attack on I.L.P. (1895)

It was quite obvious that the 1895 Trades Union Congress would take cognizance of the repercussions engendered by the General Election of that year. Of the sixteen Liberal-Labor candidates who ran for Parliament, four (G. Howell, J. Rowlands, W. R. Cremer, and S. Woods) were not returned. Since all of them were outstanding labor leaders and had the advantage of being incumbents, their failure at the polls was considered a setback to the cause of labor representation. The responsibility for this was placed upon the new force in the labor movement—the I.L.P.

¹⁵ Report T.U.C. 1893. pp. 44-49.

¹⁶ Report T.U.C. 1895. p. 55.

The Independent Labor party in this election ran twenty-eight candidates, and, though none was successful, the I.L.P. was bitterly denounced for helping to defeat genuine labor men. Besides putting forth its own candidates, the I.L.P. advised its members to abstain from voting in constituencies without a socialist aspirant to a parliamentary seat. Although the advice was not generally followed,¹⁷ the I.L.P. was damned nevertheless for its share in the defeat of the Liberal government in general and its "Lib-Labs" in particular.

It was not surprising, therefore, that sessions of the 1895 Trades Union Congress should constitute an occasion for a scathing attack on the Independent Labor party. John Jenkins, in his presidential address, denounced the tactics of the I.L.P. He attributed the reduction in the workers' representatives in the next Parliament to defection within labor's ranks. The repudiation of the I.L.P. candidates at the polls amply refuted their claim that they were champions of trades union opinions. Jenkins further maintained that, regardless of motives, the outcome of I.L.P. electoral policies undermined some candidates most in sympathy with the demands of the Trades Union Congress, converted the term "labor candidates into a byword of reproach and mistrust," and demonstrated that the worst enemies of the advancement of labor might be those of their own household. In his judgment, the I.L.P. was anti-labor and anti-trade unionist. Its hopeless candidatures were not only useless but mischievous, since they revealed labor's weakness and aroused antipathy against the cause they set out to benefit. With an ominous innuendo, Jenkins challenged the subject of his attack to publish a balance sheet and reveal the financial backers of I.L.P. candidates.¹⁸

In addition to its president, the T.U.C. itself administered a rebuke to the Independent Labor party. A resolution placed the Congress on record in favor of direct independent labor representation but, in addition, pledged its support in the interest of the working class to candidates adopted by and receiving support from political parties—"either Liberal, Conservative, Nationalist or Unionist."¹⁹ Not only did this resolution fail to include the I.L.P. among "political parties", but the approval of the resolution itself constituted a repudia-

¹⁷ Stewart, *J. Keir Hardie*, pp. 112-114.

¹⁸ Report T.U.C. 1895. pp. 27-29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 47.

tion of the basic philosophy of the I.L.P.—another indication of the old guard's antagonistic attitude towards the struggling I.L.P.

Foundation Laid for Labor Party (1899)

The next time that the subject of labor representation received serious consideration was at the historic 1899 Congress. At its session on Wednesday, September 6, J. H. Holmes (Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants,) moved the following resolution—drafted at the office of the I.L.P.'s organ, *The Labor Leader*—a resolution which eventually led to the formation of the Labor party.

“That this Congress, having regard to the decision of former years, and with a view of securing a better representation of labor in the House of Commons, hereby instructs the Parliamentary Committee to invite the cooperation of all the cooperative, socialistic, trade union, and other working class organizations to jointly cooperate on lines mutually agreed upon in convening a special Congress of representatives from such of the above named organizations as may be willing to take part to devise ways and means for securing the return of an increased number of Labor Members to the next Parliament.”²⁰

In presenting his motion the sponsor maintained that labor “must be free of all political parties.” The seconder, James Sexton (National Union of Dock Laborers), contended that the existing situation was untenable. The chaos and confusion engendered by prominent labor leaders opposing each other from separate platforms reflected unfavorably on the intelligence and common sense of the Trades Union Congress.

Tom Ashton—who four years later became a Labor party candidate—opposed the resolution on the ground that it was a hollow gesture. Not one trade unionist in ten thousand, he predicted, would take notice of it. Furthermore, the entrance of the labor movement into politics would weaken that movement. He echoed the sentiments of the leadership of the old unionism. His prediction, in the opinion of Frank Rose,²¹ would have come true and the resolution con-

²⁰ Report T.U.C. 1899. pp. 64-5.

signed to an unmarked grave at the hands of the Parliamentary Committee if the committee had realized the possible ramifications of the motion.

The supporters of the resolution were much more convincing than were its opponents. The veteran Ben Tillett maintained that the Congress had not adopted an intelligent political attitude since its formation. In the place of an organized political policy such as the one advocated by the workers in France and Germany, confusion prevailed in England due "to neglect of duty on the part of the labor section of the community." His fellow I.L.P.'er, Pete Curran, followed in a similar vein. The passage of the motion, he pleaded, would lead to the formation of a free organization and the formulation of a definite program. Still another member, Mr. Simmonds (Birmingham), urged passage of the resolution on the ground of direct antagonism between the two political parties and the labor party. It was labor's duty, therefore, to utilize the powerful weapon of independent political action in the workers' interest in a manner similar to the one employed by the Liberal and Conservative parties on behalf of their respective adherents.

The sole woman delegate, Margaret Bondfield, eloquently supported the resolution, attributing unfulfilled promises and futile parliamentary efforts to a lack of political independence. What labor needed was a legislative delegation capable of taking its own stand on any particular question. She also announced that her organization had instructed her to support all practicable means "for securing some concerted action on the part of trade unionists, socialist, and cooperative societies with that in view."

A dissenting voice came from W. Johnson, delegate from the Miners Federation of Great Britain. He urged rejection of the proposal on the ground that all men who came to the congress were not of the same opinion.

The little realized momentous resolution was then put to a card vote.²¹ The resolution was, for the resolution 546,000; against, 434,000.²² Thus a measure portending no radical departures in the immediate future, and adopted by a fairly

²¹ Rose, *The Coming Force*. pp. 71-2.

²² The card vote system was introduced at the 1894 T.U.C. as a means of lessening the influence of the "Political Adventurers" and of retaining control by the large trade unions. See G. D. H. Cole, *Short History of the British Working Class*. VII. p. 171.

²³ Report T.U.C. 1899. p. 66.

close vote, led to epoch-making consequences. Before the convening of the next Trades Union Congress, the resolution brought into existence the Labor Representation Committee which six years later assumed the name of the "Labor Party".

IN SUMMATION

When viewed in retrospect, the first generation of Trades Union Congresses made great headway in the evolution of political independence. The goal envisioned by an ever increasing number was inevitable; but the road leading to it was tortuous and encumbered by obstacles of tradition and reminiscences of previous failures. Cautiously starting its career as scarcely more than a publicity agency for an incipient labor movement, gradually unshackled from the tenets of a laissez-faire capitalism, the Trades Union Congress slowly evolved into an annual workers' parliament. Hardly noticed at first, its sessions have become the center of attention of those entrusted with the responsibility of policy making for the nation.

The debates on labor representation best illustrate this evolution. Ignoring political action at first, the Congress could not sidestep an issue so fundamentally affecting the daily life of the proletarian masses. Step-by-step the path towards independent political independence was trod. The most obvious — the necessity for a workers' delegation in the House of Commons — was taken early without much difficulty. The realization of the futility of a policy of collaboration with existing parties, even the left wing Liberals, began more gradually to dawn upon the delegates. The solution of the almost insurmountable financial problem required greater boldness and more time. The other essential prerequisite for political independence, the acceptance of a socialist philosophy, came last of all and foreshadowed its inevitable concomitant — independent political action by labor.

All of these steps were the inescapable consequences of forces outside the control of the Trades Union Congress. As the century entered its third quarter, British capitalism was meeting with the competition from other nations on the road to industrialization. Consequently the policy of the "Little Englanders" and of free trade was replaced by one of imperialism and protection. In addition the economic environ-

ment of the workers was intolerably bad due to unemployment, harrowing poverty, and wretched housing, to mention only a few.

These conditions evoked in the eighties a storm of protest comparable to that of the Chartist era. Advocates of a variety of panaceas found sympathetic audiences. The socialist agitation in particular made considerable penetration among the working classes. The waves of the revolutionary thought beat heavily against the old labor leadership, corroded its influence, and made possible the wresting of its power by newcomers imbued with radical ideas and committed to new policies. In the first half of the twentieth century, these new policies were destined to exert an increasingly profound influence on the political and economic life of Great Britain and, indeed, of the entire world.



BRITISH LABOR PARTY, 1900-1945

<i>General Election</i>	<i>Laborites Elected to Parliament</i>	<i>Labor Vote</i>	<i>Labor Party Membership</i>
1900	2	62,698	375,931
1906	29	323,195	998,338
1910 (Jan.)	40	505,690	1,430,539
1910 (Dec.)	42	370,802	1,430,539
1918	57	2,244,945	3,013,129
1922	142	4,236,733	3,311,036
1923	191	4,348,379	3,155,911
1924	151	5,487,620	3,194,399
1929	287	8,364,883	2,330,845
1931	46	6,362,561	2,358,066
1935	154	8,325,260	2,377,515
1945	393 *	11,992,292	3,038,697 **

* The total number of members in Parliament was 640. After the 1946 elections, the party representation was: Labor 393; Conservative, 198; National Liberal, 13; National, 2; Liberal, 12; Independents, 14. Others, 8. The Labor party in 1924, 1929 and again in 1945 became "His Majesty's Government", in 1945, with the backing of a majority of members of Parliament.

** Of the 1945 membership, 291,435 men and 195,612 women joined as individuals. The number of members through trade union affiliate was 2,510,369, and the number through socialist and cooperative societies 41,281, a total of 3,038,697. In 1946, this increased to 3,322,358.